

# Women's New Images in Red Cliff

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**Abstract**—The film is an extension of real society. By analyzing the creation of new female images in *Red Cliff*, this paper reveals how history, literature and film jointly inherit and shape the cultural values of The Three Kingdoms period. The film successfully presents historical events on the screen, showing the bravery and sacrifice in The Battle of Red Cliff, as well as the breakthrough and transformation of female images. Through the analysis of female images in films, the article emphasizes the gradual improvement of women's status in society and culture, as well as the breakthrough and transformation of female images in art works under the new environment.

**Keywords**—women, new image, gender

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a series of big-investment, well-made, ambitious films with royal themes have been released in Asia, such as *Hero* (Zhang Yimou, 2002), *The Promise* (Chen Kaige, 2005), *The Banquet* (Feng Xiaogang, 2006), and *Red Cliff I & II* (John Woo, 2008 & 2009). Through the depiction and creation of film characters and historical events, the film directors expound their understanding of the influence on contemporary culture and society through historical events at that time. One of the most familiar stories is the *Red Cliff*.

Based on The Battle of Red Cliff—one of the most famous battles in Chinese history, *Red Cliff* reenacts imaginatively and majestically an important battle in the distant past of China. Stemming from The Battle of Red Cliff, several art forms are created (such as prose, music, drama, opera, TV serials and film), which not only depict the magnificent scenery of Red Cliff, but also profoundly reflect the historical background of that era and the elegant style of heroic figures. There is a Wuhou Shrine (Wǔ Hóu Cí) being built during 420-589 AD to commemorate Zhuge Liang's upright character, loyalty and intelligence, and gradually expanded to be China's only shrine where emperor (Liu Bei) and ministers (Zhuge Liang, Guan Yu, Zhang Fei and other heroes of the Shu-Han Dynasty) are enshrined together [1]. Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei are also famous for their brotherly love that they are sworn when they meet for the first time [2]. In addition, a large number of poems have emerged to eulogize The Battle of Red Cliff, some of the heroes were poets themselves and wrote poems about the battle. Several versions of Romance of The Three Kingdoms have been made into TV series.

From the above analysis, it can be seen clearly that the male image is the absolute protagonist of past art forms. Even if there are female characters, they always beautiful, patient and they are largely accessories to male. However, the movie *Red Cliff I & II*, which was directed by John Woo and released in 2008 and 2009, featured a vivid female figure who even fought alongside the male hero on the battlefield.

Therefore, this paper takes this version as the analysis text to analyze its representations of the women's images under new circumstance.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Let's start by recalling the Battle of Red Cliff. It is a decisive battle at the end of Han Dynasty, immediately prior to the period of the Three Kingdoms in ancient China. It is regarded as one of the most famous battles in Chinese history, for it shows how a smaller army can defeat a larger, more powerful enemy through a combination of the southern warlords Liu Bei and Sun Quan [3]. As a result of the allied victory, just as De Crespigny pointed out, it is not only ensure the survival of Liu Bei and Sun Quan, giving them control of the Yangtze, but also providing a line of defence that was the basis for the later creation of the two southern kingdoms of Shu Han (蜀) and Eastern Wu (吴) [4].



Fig. 1. The Battle of Red Cliff and Cao Cao's retreat.

Source: The Encyclopedia of China.

<https://www.zgbk.com/ecph/words?SiteID=1&ID=119415&Type=bkzyb&Preview=false>

There are two famous books talking about the event. One of the most famous ones is Romance of the Three Kingdoms, which is regarded as one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature, is written by Luo Guanzhong in the 14th century in Ming Dynasty. There are several films and TV series based on this novel, one of the most popular ones is produced by CCTV in 1994, and soon became a phenomenal TV series. More than 1.5 million reviewers have scored 9.6 points out of 10 on Douban Reviews, with more than 120,000 giving five-star reviews [5]. Another historical text is Records of Three Kingdoms. It is written by Chen Shou in the 3rd century—very closer to the period of the Three Kingdom; therefore, it is regarded as the official and authoritative historical text and provided the basis for the later more

popular historical novel Romance of the Three Kingdoms [6]. This is just what Director John Woo primarily followed as a blue print for the film.

The film begins at the reluctant approval of the Han Emperor Xian to allow Prime Minister Cao Cao to embark on a campaign on eliminating the southern warlords Sun Quan and Liu Bei in the name of eradicating rebels. At the Battle of Chang Ban Po, although Liu Bei's sworn brothers Guan Yu and Zhang Fei give an excellent display of their legendary combat skills by holding off the enemy, they are defeated by Cao Cao's mighty and swiftly army because they need to save time for the civilians to retreat. Therefore, Liu Bei's strategist Zhuge Liang suggested an alliance with Sun Quan, while Cao Cao also allied with the naval generals Cai Mao and Zhang Yun. After Sun-Liu Allies won the first war, Cao Cao tried to weaken the Allies with typhoid fever while Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu plotted to destroy Cai Mao and Zhang Yun. Meanwhile Sun Shangxiang has quietly sneaked into Cao's Camp to steal information. Finally, Sun-Liu Allies defeated Cao Cao's army and won the Battle of Red Cliff.

*Red Cliff I* grossed 124 million dollars in Asia and broke the box office record previously held by *Titanic* in Mainland China [7], and ranked 3 stars (out of 4) [8]. Researchers also reacted positively to the film. Taking John Woo's *Red Cliff* and Yoshikawa Hideji's *Three Kingdoms* as examples, Lin Haifu made a comparative study on the design of characters in "Red Cliff" between China and Japan, especially Cao Cao, Zhou Yu and Zhuge Liang, and its results showed that Japan always tried its best to transform it into things suitable for local customs after accepting foreign culture [9]. From the perspective of disenchantment, Chen Qiquan deconstructs the history from plot, lines, characters in *Red Cliff*. Through modernized plots, secularized characters and colloquialized line, although the historical ontology has lost its sanctity and absolute truth, the historical narrative has gained a broader and free-living space in the widely advertised [10]. By analyzing the words and behaviors of Cao Cao, Liu Bei, Sun Quan and Zhou Yu in *Red Cliff*, Chen Hui explains the motivation for launching the battle of Red Cliff, he also focuses on Woo's themes of mutual help and friendship between men [11]. Hoang even noticed a very romantic and emotional scene when Zhou Yu and Zhuge Liang help a horse to give birth which expressed their respect for living creature [12]. There is no doubt that the emphasis on male characters is the feature of *Red Cliff*, and it is also the eternal theme of John Woo's films. While he was interviewed by the CCTV-6, Woo states that traditionally vilified characters such as Cao Cao and Zhou Yu are given a more historically accurate treatment in the film [13].

However, other authors note that *Red Cliff* has added many scenes depicting female characters such as Xiao Qiao and Sun Shangxiang, which is where the film subverts history and the novel [11, 14]. Chen Kehong points out that these female characters become important forces driving the development of the plot rather than eye candy [15]. This is in line with Huang Mengshui & Shi Guanghui's opinion that the presence of Mrs Liu (Liu Bei's wife), Xiaoqiao, and Sun Shangxiang played a structural role in the elimination of violence [16]. While Yu Hesheng still regards both Xiao Qiao and Sun Shangxiang as the decoration and ornament of the hero [17].

We can see clearly that although some researchers have noticed the female characters in *Red Cliff* and, to some extent, recognized their positive contributions to the development of the plot, few studies have been conducted specifically on female characters. Therefore, from the perspective of gender studies, this paper, on the one hand, compares the changes of female images in several Chinese-language film made by John Woo before he went to Hollywood and after he returned from Hollywood, and on the other hand, focuses on the analysis of several distinctive female images in *Red Cliff*.

### III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

We choose *Red Cliff I & II* made by John Woo as research material, the reasons are as follows. The first is that the source material of *Red Cliff* has an exalted pedigree. The story, with its various episodes, and scheming politicians and military tacticians, is well known across Asia, has infiltrated school curricula across the region and being adapted into movies, computer games, manga and more. Another reason is because of the director John Woo. John Woo is arguably the most influential action director in Asia, the position established by a series of films that celebrated individual heroics. As Woo's first Chinese-language epic since returning from Hollywood, *Red Cliff* is a four-hour-long diptych film, and two female characters were significantly explored and depicted in a male-dominated film. This is a departure from Woo's previous style, and we are particularly curious about how and why these female figures were created.

To analyze the portrayal of female characters in *Red Cliff*, this paper applied text analysis that considered textural aspects related to different periods of John Woo's representative films, and focus on the new female image in *Red Cliff*. Analyzing female characters must follow the selection criteria: (1) the main female character in the film; (2) the main force that driving the story development; (3) having some traditional virtue of the Chinese nation.

### IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Gender studies in film are commonplace for academia. Researches have shown that women are under-represented across a range of media and settings, and they always portrayed as stereotyped roles, for example, nonprofessionals, homemakers, wives or parents, and sexual gatekeepers [18]. These stereotyped roles also exist in John Woo's films.

#### A. Stereotypical Images of Women in John Woo's Early Films

Gender stereotype is based on some sort of "core" masculinity and femininity, and individuals may use such "core" masculinity and femininity in their self-construal [19]. In Woo's early works that released in Hong Kong China, the images of women are stereotyped whereas the men are the perpetuated leading characters. For example, in the ironically titled *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), one of the all-time successes of Hong Kong cinema [20], it is a gangster film that happened between three men, all of them had have excellent performance, the only female role is Jackie Zhong who is the girlfriend of a police officer, there are no female characters designed on the film posters (see Fig. 2). It seems that Jackie Zhong has exerting none influence during the film



development.



Fig. 2. Posters of *A Better Tomorrow*.

Source: Douban Film.

<https://movie.douban.com/subject/1297574/photos?type=R>

*The Killer* (1989), which can be read as a supremely nostalgic (and gun-loving), self-conscious commentary on genre, demonstrates the influence of Chinese genres such as martial chivalry films and swordplay epics; the opening images during the title sequence of Woo's breakthrough international success [20], which offers excellent gun fight of the two male leading actors. The only female actress is a young nightclub singer named Jennie, who is the reason why Ah-Jong-- a professional killer who has decided to retire, decided to carry out another hit. Female characters began to appear on posters, albeit only in a small corner (see Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Posters of *The Killer*.

Source: Douban Film.

<https://movie.douban.com/subject/1296519/photos?type=R>

*Once a Thief* (1991), as a local box-office success than the Hollywood blockbuster *Terminator 2*, talks about the story that happened of three orphans. They grow up learning high-tech methods of theft and specialize in stealing treasured paintings and played an indispensable role of the team. One of them is a girl, though the actress did not perform as much as the two male roles, her performance in the dancing ball that of stealing keys is quite excellent.



Fig. 4. Posters of *Once a Thief*.

Source: Douban Film.

<https://movie.douban.com/subject/1295409/photos?type=R>

### B. Stereotype and New Changes of Female Image in *Red Cliff I & II* (2008, 2009)

*Red Cliff* follows the style of John Woo's previous films, with excellent martial arts, aiming at brotherly love. However, there is also a little different theme in it, which is because of Sun Shangxiang and Xiao Qiao's appropriate performance, it also represents the requirements that women call for equal roles in the society. Just as he said in an interview programme [21], although these classical Chinese women were known for their beauty, they also have a strong personality that the modern viewer can relate to. In the film, both Sun Shangxiang and Xiao Qiao are not only a stunning and graceful beauty, but beneath their looks, are the strong, iron-willed women who also loving their countries.

The depiction of the three female images—Mrs. Liu (Liu Bei's wife), Xiaoqiao (Zhou Yu's wife), and Sun Shangxiang (Sun Quan's sister)—reflects the transition from totally traditional female image to a semi-traditional image and then to new images. Mrs. Liu, who does not even have her own name in the film, appeared in the Battle of Chang Ban Po. Before General Zhao Yun's rescue, she was so brave that protect her infant son in the chaos of war; when the baby successfully handed over to Zhao Yun, she realized that they would be annihilated completely (a quick point-of-view shot of injured Zhao Yun, dead soldiers, and burning houses). In the heterosexual hierarchy, women are understood to be subordinate to men [22], so she jumped down the well to kill herself in order not to burden Zhao further. Her self-sacrifice not only protects her chastity, but also brings the hope of survival for her son and Zhao Yun.

Xiao Qiao was to *The Battle of Red Cliff* what Helen was to the Trojan War. To be the most beautiful woman in China at that time, she is gentle and virtuous, not only read poetry and books, but also good at housekeeping, and gave her husband, Zhou Yu, full respect. Following the course of previous films, Xiao Qiao might have been portrayed as a beautiful eye candy. However, when she realized that she was the root reason of Cao Cao's invasion towards Eastern Wu, Xiao Qiao went deep into the Cao camp at the cost of her life to persuade Cao Cao to quit the army rather than feeling sorry for herself like other beauties in ancient Chinese history acted as the roots of troubles. Finally, Xiao Qiao succeeded in delaying Cao Cao and buying time for the Sun-Liu Alliance

to launch an attack. Xiao Qiao belongs to that kind from demurely moves towards the new feminine transition character.

Sun Shangxiang established a new female image with her bold words and outstanding behavior and indicated that she wants to be liberated from gender norms. While hunting tiger with Sun Quan and Zhou Yu, her performance is no less than them. By locking up the acupuncture point of Lu Su's horse, she won herself the right to participate in the war. Her ability was recognized by the allied forces by successfully leading a light cavalry unit to lure Cao Cao's vanguard army into the Eight Trigrams Formation. Finally, she disguised as a soldier and spied into Cao Cao's camp, successfully returned with a map of the enemy formation. Although the biological differences between sexes (i.e. between the male and female bodies) can appear as the natural justification of the socially constructed difference between genders, and of the social division of labour [23], Sun Shangxiang's new identity was accepted by the Sun-Liu Alliance, indicating that soldiers are not a male-only social division of labor.

When Sun Shangxiang expressed her intention to join the army, she was also questioned by the core officials of Sun-Liu Alliance. Facing of all kinds of dissuade, Sun Shangxiang said "a woman should share the responsibility for the rise and fall of the kingdom". This is actually a very famous saying in China that first appeared at the End of Ming Dynasty—nearly one thousand years later, it is originally saying that a man should share the responsibility for the rise and fall of the kingdom (tiān xià xīng wáng, pǐ fū yǒu zé). The filmmaker tried to express his own values and ideals by the Princess-heroes in movies express more than the personal views and dreams of a particular author, they also embody current values and ideals [2].

### C. No Hog-Tied by Gender, More Images for Women

Gender is not exactly what one "is" nor is it precisely what one "has", it is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized [22]. The meaning of gender was constructed and structured by the media [24], because the media are manipulated by the ruling patriarchal ideology, what is seen as natural, as clear-cut, and obvious, is in fact a concept produced by our society [25]. That's why there is such a variety of female images in *Red Cliff*.

For the stereotyped female images, no matter how the film is adapted, it should conform to the images of men and women given by the historical conditions at that time. *Red Cliff* talks about the event that is happened at the end of Han Dynasty, it is the time that "the ideas associated with the most famous philosopher in the history of China [26]". After Confucianism gained predominance overall other schools, Confucian ethics gradually became a universal yardstick for behavior and idea [27]. Therefore, both women and men's behaviors are shaped by the Confucianism. A common view of traditional Chinese society is of one that the females are regarded as the pawns of men [28].

The family occupies a central position in Confucian culture [29], and closely associated with the family system have been the relations between man and women, and the position of women [30]. In family, boys were regarded as more valuable than girls, and are constantly solidified through the education system [30], property inheritance [28]

and family status [22]. To be specific, the education of the daughter was usually given in the home by mother, and consisted of such matters as the management of a household, and the duties owed to a husband, a mother-in-law, and others of the husband's relations, while schools are only for boys. For Mrs. Liu, her existence is dedicated to the family -- to save the soldiers for her husband, to save the son for her husband. In addition, women cannot inherit any family property; men, especially firstborn sons, not only inherit the family property, but are also obliged to support their parents in old age and to worship their ancestors forever. In the film, the newborn horse naturally belongs to Zhou Yu, and his wife, Xiao Qiao, did not even have the right to name the newborn foal.

Although appropriate in the historical context of the Han Dynasty, these female behaviors can be questioned by moviegoers. I still remember that while I was watching *Red Cliff* in the cinema, some girls sitting around me criticized Liu Bei's wife as very stupid. This is because the female image created by the media has not kept up with 'real' social changes, and there was a 'culture lag'—the media worked to reinforce 'traditional' images of women [24]. Therefore, Woo gives a new interpretation to the Battle of Red Cliff and provides a new female figure in the film—Sun Shangxiang—to cater audiences. Under the dual background of the awakening of Chinese women's consciousness and the rise of female economy, her words and actions are all indicated that she is the new feminine. This is in line with Hollows's opinion that the relationship between the media and reality rests on the assumption that the media acts as a 'window on the world', that media images are, or should be, a reflection or representation of society [24].

Women have different social expectations under the patriarchal society. They are thinking of suitable for the jobs such as teachers, nurses, and secretaries, and they should act as bringing up children, taking care of the old and managing the household. Gender is like the apparatus by which the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative was assumed as of masculine and feminine [22]. As a matter of fact, men are also able to deal with these things that have mentioned above whereas women are capacity of handling other kinds of works.

Sun Shangxiang is the perfect example of the women's liberation. In such a society that of Confucianism family system, as the princess of the Eastern Wu Kingdom, Sun Shangxiang also has a responsibility for protecting the nation. The most common way to build a relationship is to get married with Shu Kingdom. But she refused to do so. Instead of sacrificing her marriage, she taking part in the army and fighting against with her brother to protect her nation.

Woo's portrayal of Sun Shangxiang in the film *Red Cliff* is essentially a depiction of his own interpretation of reality. This is in line with Zoonen's [24] opinion that arguing for more realistic images of is always an argument for the representation of "your" version of reality. The visual media, however, presented a 'window on the world' came under question because it is the men who have power and control while women are generally disadvantaged and have lower status [25], pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female [31].

Therefore, there are scholars who have attempted to



safeguard a theoretical perspective to imply that gender has the potential to move beyond the naturalized binary by separating the term “gender” from both masculinity and femininity through “gender trouble” or “gender blending”, “transgender” or “cross-gender” [22]. It seems that cross-gender images do appear in some forms of arts. For example, male performers can be disguised as Dan—a general term for any female role in Beijing Opera. A film named *Farewell My Concubine*, which was directed by Chen Kaige, is one of the central works that talks about the stories of two stars in a Peking opera troupe. One of the famous Dan roles is performed by a male actor (see Fig. 5) and won the Special Award in Chinese Performance Art Association in 1993 [32], more than 2.2 million netizens have scored 9.6 out of 10 on Douban, 82.5% of which are five-star [33].



Fig. 5. Leslie Cheung (Zhang Guorong) as Cheng Dieyi.

Source: Douban Film. <https://movie.douban.com/photos/photo/510110158/>

## V. CONCLUSION

This paper analyzed *Red Cliff* in-depth, we can see clearly that it is not merely focus on the battle, but also expresses John Woo’s dreams of seeking peaceful life and brotherly love. It is also worth noting that he adds a new theme that wants to express under the new social reality, that is to say, women’s new image.

In sharp contrast to the absolute dominance of male images in John Woo’s previous films, female images in this movie are no longer just beautiful and patient accessories, but have more rich and three-dimensional personality traits. He skillfully combines historical characters with modern aesthetics, making the female characters show their wisdom, courage and tenacity while maintaining their traditional charm. The film also successfully combines the femininity and strength of women, showing the multifaceted nature of women. Their heroic performance on the battlefield, as well as their firm choice in emotional disputes, become the key force driving the story rather than mere eye candy.

In general, the new female image in *Red Cliff* is a subversion and innovation of the traditional art form. It not only allows the audience to see the strength and value of women, but also provides more possibilities and inspiration for future artistic creation. In the future, we look forward to seeing more female images with depth and breadth, so that women can blossom their own unique light on the screen.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Jing Wen determined the framework and research methods for the overall research; Ling Zhang collected relevant materials, and they wrote the paper together; Jing Wen finished the overall polishing; both authors had approved the final version.

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